

One Bad Can Last

Today, Sgt. Knight uses her experience to educate others about the dangers of drinking and driving. Here, she holds a photo of herself taken shortly after the crash.



Photo by Sgt. Kimberly L. Wilkie, USMC

Sgt. Knight's head smashed through the windshield, scalping her from just above her eyebrows to the top of her head.

The young man driving this Chevy Suburban had a promising college-sports career ahead of him until this wreck.



Photos courtesy of Sgt. Marianne L. Knight, USMC

Decision Leave ing Scars

By Sgt. Kimberly L. Wilkie, USMC,
8th Marine Corps District, Dallas

Marine Sgt. Marianne L. Knight (formerly Davenport) graduated sixth in her series at boot camp with a Meritorious Mast. She hit the ground running when she graduated from Military Occupational School as a military-police officer. Shortly after arriving at Marine Corps Air Station, El Toro, she was awarded a Navy Achievement Medal.

Then everything changed for this hard-working and ambitious Marine. It started with a bad decision one hot, November 1998, evening when the then-LCpl. Davenport decided to go out after work and blow off some steam

with fellow Marines at a local tavern. She consumed six or seven beers on an empty stomach, left the tavern about 10 p.m., and slid behind the wheel of her 1985 Ford Mustang 5.0. She then started a 1.5-mile journey that “temporarily” would end her life.

While driving more than 100 mph without her seat belt on and with a BAC of .17, Marianne ran a red light and slammed broadside into a Chevy Suburban that, in turn, careened into another Ford. According to the police reports, there were no skid marks at the scene, which would indicate she never touched her brakes.

Here’s what most likely happened next, as compiled during a crash assessment by Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD):

These front and side views show what Sgt. Knight’s Ford Mustang looked like after it crashed into a Chevy Suburban at 100 mph.



● At .10 seconds, the front bumper and the grill collapsed.

● At .20 seconds, the hood crumpled as it rose into the air, with the rear wheels still spinning. The front quarter panels hit the doors with so much force that the rear of the car came forward and met parts already rippling backward. Marianne's body lurched forward at 20 times the force of gravity, with a weight equivalent of 3,000 pounds. Her right arm rammed into the dashboard as the engine broke into the driver's compartment, dislocating her hip and smashing into her right knee.

● At .30 seconds, her body continued forward. Her chest thrust toward the steering column, and her head neared the sun visor.

● At .40 seconds, the front of the car collapsed entirely. The rear of the car, however, as well as Marianne's body, continued forward.

● At .50 seconds, her chest slammed into the steering wheel with enough force to bruise her heart, to break ribs, and to collapse her esophagus.

● At .60 seconds, Marianne's face smashed through the windshield, scalping her forehead from just above her eyebrow to the top of her head. The force caused her brain to swell. Meanwhile, the rear of the car completed its forward movement and fell to the ground.

● At .70 seconds, all forward velocity had stopped, and her body settled back into the heap of twisted metal. Her scalped skin returned to its previous location.

Emergency-medical technicians removed Marianne from the wreckage and loaded her into an ambulance, where they feverishly worked over her. For five long minutes during their treatment, her heart stopped beating.

Marianne spent four days in a hospital with swelling of the brain. She also was covered with lacerations and had two broken ribs, a broken wrist, a bruised heart, a dislocated hip, torn knee ligaments, and permanent scars on the front of her legs. Surgeons used 355 stitches inside and out to repair the damage. Her scabs took more than six weeks to heal. Her hair grew back, though thinner on top than it once was, and she styles it to cover the miraculously faint scars on her forehead.

Physical injuries, however, were only the beginning of the ramifications Marianne had to


deal with as a result of her bad decision that November night. The young man in the Chevy Suburban had a promising college-sports career ahead of him. Now, he's sidelined forever because of the injuries he sustained. As if the guilt of what she did to a complete stranger wasn't enough, she also had to deal with the effects her bad decision had on her family.

Marianne is the primary custodian of two young daughters. Because of her injuries, they had to live with family until she recovered enough to care for them. She lost out on about a year of their lives.

After a police officer read the Miranda rights to Marianne that night in the hospital bed, he took her driver's license, and the state of California suspended it for one year. She eventually was convicted of misdemeanor DUI (involving injuries) in a court of law. She received three years of probation, spent five days in an Orange County jail, and was assigned 160 hours of community service. She also paid \$1,350 in fines, besides her attorney's fees.

The costs didn't stop there, either. She was required to attend a six-month, drunk-driving-education program that cost her \$700. The court also ordered her to attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings for the duration of that program. She further was admitted into a one-month, military, substance-abuse program as an inpatient.

Finally, Marianne was relieved of her duties as a military-police officer and, at the recommendation of her superiors, was being processed out of the Marine Corps. Because she's a survivor, though, she picked up the tattered pieces of her life and started rebuilding a promising future in the Marine Corps.

Although most drunk drivers are forced out of the Marine Corps, Marianne got a second chance. The higher levels in her chain of command looked at the whole Marine. They didn't judge her on just the one error in judgment but on her merit before and after the incident. 

The author was assigned to the staff of Flight Jacket, the base newspaper for the 3d Marine Aircraft Wing, when she wrote this article and the related ones that follow. They appeared in the May 19, 2000 issue of the newspaper.

Picking Up the Pieces: Life After the Fact

By Sgt. Kimberly L. Wilkie, USMC,
8th Marine Corps District, Dallas



There are two reasons why Marine Sgt. Marianne Knight feels her life was spared in the November 1998 drunk-driving mishap. “First, my kids still needed me,” she said. “Second, I knew right away that I had to talk to other Marines about what had happened to me. I seriously had injured somebody else, as well as myself; it’s a miracle neither of us died.”

Thanks to LtCol. Jonathan Ray, USMC(Ret.), former director of safety for Marine Corps Air Bases Western Area, Marianne has been fulfilling that second purpose with a PowerPoint presentation. It’s not your run-of-the-mill safety brief, though. Instead,

it’s a dynamic, illustrated brief full of graphic photos of the mishap, with a dramatic, moment-by-moment description of the events that fateful night and the ongoing ramifications of her life-changing decision. LtCol. Ray helped her develop the story, and he also helped her overcome the emotional obstacles of reliving the crash during each showing.

Marianne started giving her presentation to Marines at 3d Marine Aircraft Wing Headquarters in January 2000, when she was assigned to the safety office there. The presentations—at least one a month—continued through her February 2001 reenlistment and reassignments to Marine Wing Communications Squadron-38 and then school.


Many of the Marines attending these presentations have come up afterward and talked to Marianne. “They told me things like, ‘I have a brother who was killed in a drunk-driving accident,’” she said. ““Thank you for bringing this to light.””

These comments reinforced Marianne’s feeling that she needed to share her experience with others and to warn them about how vulnerable they really are when they drink and drive. She hopes her experience will have convinced them that the dangers of drinking and driving are real. “You aren’t 10 feet tall and bulletproof, no matter what you think,” she warned. “You never know what’s going to

happen—no one does. I would hate to see one of you go through what I did. It's an experience that never goes away."

Some people don't agree that Marianne still should be in the Marine Corps--or that she's been punished enough, but as she pointed out, "They'll never know what I've gone through."

Marianne is grateful her leaders gave her the opportunity to stay in the Corps. "I keep trying to honor their decision," she said.

Will there ever be redemption for what she did? Marianne doesn't think so. "It's more about setting new goals and moving forward," she offered. For her, "It's the only direction to go." 


Before You Drink and Drive...

By Sgt. Kimberly L. Wilkie, USMC,
8th Marine Corps District, Dallas

- Understand that alcohol, wine and liquor are drugs.
- Understand that the word "drunk" means being visibly impaired, such as staggering or slurring your speech.
- Understand that "intoxicated" is a legal term, reflecting the amount of alcohol in a person's blood. In California, a BAC of .08 is required before you can be convicted of drinking and driving.
- Understand that "impaired" means that your ability to think clearly and to react appropriately isn't fully functional.
- Understand that you can be "impaired" by alcohol and other drugs long before you become "intoxicated" or "drunk."
- Understand that research by the American Medical Association shows that your ability to drive is "impaired" at .04 or .05 BAC.
- Understand that at low levels of intoxication, you can "feel" more competent to drive than you did before beginning to drink. This is a false security.
- Understand that cold showers,



coffee or exercise will not make you sober. Only time can do that—and alcohol burns off much more slowly than it is consumed.

- Understand that in every state in the nation, drunk driving is a crime!
- Understand that getting behind the wheel only once when your ability to drive is impaired could change your life forever!
- Stop saying "one for the road" and start saying "none for the road."
- Say, "No thanks, I'm driving" when you plan to drive.
- Never drink and drive, regardless of your age. To find out more about drinking and driving, visit MADD's national website at info@maddsandiego.org. 

Thanks to Bob Helie, ground safety manager at Marine Corps Air Station, Miramar, for bringing this series of stories to my attention.—Ed.